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Rough sailing may lie ahead for water plan

Harmony could evaporate in the face of old disputes

By Michael Gardner

COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

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SACRAMENTO -- California's dysfunctional water family gathered Friday to applaud a landmark deal that maps an environmentally friendly course to boost the state's precious water supplies.

By next week, however, squabbles are likely to resume over pouring concrete for reservoirs, whether fish or farmers should prevail in disputes and the best way to ship water south.

For most Californians, whose only connection to water is at the tap, the biggest question may be who is going to pick up the \$8.5 billion tab.

Commitments have been made by the Legislature and Congress to absorb the largest share through tax dollars. Urban water districts expect to pay special user fees that would be passed on to consumers. Farmers are bracing for higher irrigation costs that could raise food prices.

"A lot of Californians in a lot of different ways are going to pay," said San Diego businessman Mike Madigan, who chairs a water advisory board for Gov. Gray Davis.

The governor and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt on Thursday unveiled the blueprint to guide California water policy for the next 30 years. Despite some misgivings, farm, urban and environmental interests joined in the applause.

"California is launching the largest and most comprehensive water program in the world," Davis said.

And among the most expensive. Proposals include \$2.9 billion for farm and city conservation, \$1 billion for environmental restoration, \$1 billion to store water underground and \$800 million to improve water quality.

"Money is the great medium of exchange here," Madigan said. "The solution uses money to buy restoration.

"It uses money to buy water. It uses money to build facilities. It is how this deal got worked out."

Six years in the making, the Davis-Babbitt plan promises improvements for the ecologically fragile Sacramento Delta. Drinking water for 22 million Californians flows through the region.

The loudest opposition came from Rep. John Doolittle, a Sacramento-area Republican with influence in GOP leadership circles.

"Most of this plan is the product of spin doctors, not engineers," complained Doolittle, a fervent backer of a dam near Auburn that was not included.

The Davis-Babbitt plan proposes to enlarge three reservoirs and possibly build a fourth near Colusa.

Rep. Gary Condit, D-Ceres, who helped create the plan, conceded that Doolittle is a barrier.

"You zero in on one of the problems we face in Congress," Condit said.

In California, Senate President Pro Tempore John Burton, D-San Francisco, is carrying legislation to spend millions on Delta projects. Additional money is in Davis' draft state budget.

The balance of costs will be passed on to those who would benefit.

"We need to know what is being built before we're going to pay for it," said Jason Peltier, who represents several agricultural districts.

Central Valley farmers already contribute \$40 million a year to restoration programs, he said.

Any fee increase "would be a deal-killer, drop-dead issue," Peltier threatened.

Maureen Stapleton, executive director of the San Diego County Water Authority, said users will agree to pay more "as long as the costs are in line with the benefits received."

Southern Californians shouldn't expect higher bills immediately, all agree. Water districts' share of the \$8.5 billion would be spread out over seven years. Some funding mechanisms, such as bonds, may be used to minimize annual costs.

"The investment is going to be well worth it," said Ron Gastelum, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District.